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SUBJECT: MEPI ALUMNI MEETING: A CIVIL SOCIETY SPRINGBOARD

Ref: a) 07 Sanaa 2313

b) 07 Tunis 109

Sensitive But Unclassified. Handle Accordingly.

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Taking a "two birds with one stone" approach, the MEPI Regional Office in Tunis brought together select MEPI alumni holding civic-activist profiles to beef-up a BMENA civil society event and to hold a separate alumni meeting. The participants, from a dozen Arab countries, spent one day preparing for the fourth Parallel Civil Society Forum (PCSF) in Sanaa, which enhanced their contribution and resulted in six of them being chosen by their peers to represent civil society at the upcoming Forum for the Future ministerial meeting. Following the PCSF, the MEPI alumni regrouped with MEPI staff from Washington and Tunis to provide USG officials with a first-hand evaluation of that event. Further discussions included a frank exchange on the future of reform in the region and the appropriate role for the United States. As MEPI continues to seek out ways to sustain and build on relations made among the thousands of civil society actors who have been involved in MEPI programs, this alumni meeting served as an effective model for convening activists from different fields around a single, galvanizing event.
End Summary.

THE SELECTION

2. (SBU) The MEPI Regional Office (RO) in Tunis, in coordination with the RO in Abu Dhabi, invited 25 civil society activists to participate in a MEPI alumni meeting called "Developing Networks and Sharing Experiences" on the margins of the fourth annual Civil Society Parallel Event (PCSF) to the Forum for the Future, held Dec. 2-3, in Sanaa. The invitees had participated in previous MEPI activities, such as the New Generations program for established activists, the Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program for emerging reformers, or as implementers of MEPI local grant projects. They were invited for their experience and expertise in a variety of fields, including law, media, human rights, and women's empowerment.

3. (SBU) In the end, 19 activists from 12 Arab countries and the Palestinian Territories participated in the alumni meeting, as well as the PCSF. They were joined by NEA DAS Kent Patton and five reps from NEA/PI and the Tunis RO. The meeting achieved a number of key objectives. First, it fit into MEPI's goal of building up alumni

activities for the thousands of actors throughout the region who have taken part in MEPI programs over the past five years. Next, it contributed to ongoing efforts to keep USG officials in contact with alumni members, as well as putting and keeping them in contact with each other. The meeting also served as a model for how to bring alumni from different fields together around a galvanizing event, such as the PCSF.

THE MEETING

14. (SBU) The purpose of the alumni meeting was twofold: 1) to prepare participants for an active role in the PCSF, which took place following the first day of the meeting; and 2) to provide them with an opportunity to give the USG officials in attendance their views on the PCSF once it ended, as well as recommendations for how the USG might better advance democratic reform in the region. Toward the first goal, the participants heard from MEPI officials and other civil society actors about the process and outcomes of the previous Forum for the Future and PCSF conferences held in 2004 in Morocco, 2005 in Bahrain, and 2006 in Jordan. They then divided into teams, based on their own interests and areas of expertise, to brainstorm on how they could be most effective contributing to the PCSF.

15. (SBU) The MEPI alumni then took part in the two-day PCSF, where they were involved in each of the six practical workshops, which included promoting reforms around freedom of expression, the legal environment for NGOs, education and labor markets, women and political empowerment, youth and political participation, and the private sector's role in democratic reform (Ref A). Their impact was clearly evident, as one MEPI alumni member presided over the general PCSF, while a second was chosen to chair the workshop on women and political empowerment. Six of the MEPI alumni were elected

TUNIS 00000008 002 OF 002

by their peers to be among the 24 members of civil society who will present the PCSF recommendations to the Forum for the Future delegates, when it's conference takes place in Sanaa in the first part of this year.

THE POST-MORTEM

16. (SBU) Following the PCSF, the MEPI participants were brought back together to evaluate the event and to provide recommendations for future civil society activities, including next year's PCSF. On the positive side, alumni agreed the overall participation at the PCSF was excellent, with more than 300 civil society representatives from all BMENA countries present and engaging in discussions of controversial subjects that would not have been permitted by some of their governments just a few years ago. The MEPI alumni also were pleased to see how the participants stuck to the reform agenda rather than getting side-tracked by discussions of Iraq, Israel, or other topics, as had been the case in previous PCSF conferences (Ref B). They also praised the preparations of the PCSF organizers and the positive media coverage of the event. On the negative side, there were complaints that many of the workshop sessions had too many participants to be effective. If the workshop size cannot be reduced, future meetings should at least look at tightening the procedures and perhaps hiring professional moderators to increase their efficiency.

17. (SBU) The overarching concern voiced by MEPI alumni members was that while many good recommendations came out of the PCSF workshops, they remain recommendations only. The challenge, they said, is in finding mechanisms to compel the Arab governments attending the Forum for the Future to adopt these recommendations in their respective countries. One alumni member pointed out that while governments had agreed to many of the recommendations regarding freedom of expression at the last Forum, none of these suggestions was ever implemented and the situation in most countries has actually worsened since last year. A number of suggestions were made on how to hold governments accountable, including monitoring promises against actual reform achievements and shaming through the media those governments that

failed to live up to their commitments.

THE USG ROLE

18. (SBU) During the final session, the MEPI alumni offered suggestions on how the USG might better promote democratic reform in the region. Several of them thanked us for our assistance yet warned against putting them in difficult or even dangerous positions. They said it was critical for US officials to fully understand the working environment in each country and to be careful in reaching out to the true reformers rather than government-backed actors posing as civil society activists. A number of participants faulted the USG for remaining too close to oppressive leaders and for failing to be consistent when dealing with states that fulfill American interests yet violate human rights principles. Some complained of problems with US NGOs and/or contracting companies, which they said do not coordinate well with local organizations and often receive funding to implement reform programs that local groups could better implement, thereby taking funding opportunities away from them. Toward this end, several of the participants reiterated how reform must emerge from the region, without being imposed by the United States, but said the USG has a role to play providing funds, expertise, and political support to those trying to forge change.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) The MEPI alumni meeting proved to be an effective venue for bringing together civil society actors around a meaningful event as part of our ongoing effort to strengthen a network of democratic reformers in the region. There was a definite "esprit de corps" that emerged by the end of the alumni event, with many participants already discussing how they could continue to collaborate on a range of reform matters. The impact of the alumni on the Civil Society Parallel Event was also clear. Not only did they help improve the quality of that conference, but we expect many of them will become more active in the larger BMENA/Forum for the Future process.
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